

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 38

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW
July/August 1982

Blazing silos!

Combine a surfeit of leaks
about Soviet missiles
with a dearth of digging—
and look what you get

by ANDREW COCKBURN

The precise size and scope of Soviet military power is of particular importance now that the administration is embarked simultaneously on a massive arms build-up and on arms-reduction negotiations with the Russians. Unfortunately, almost all information about Soviet strength emanates from the intelligence agencies and reaches us via national security journalists. And, all too often, these journalists act merely as conduits for the information handed to them.

One inducement for not further investigating such information is that, since it has been garnered through the techniques of espionage, it is, of course, classified as "secret." And just as the act of classifying a piece of information implies that it is an important fact, so, too, the acquisition and publication of such "facts" implies commendable enterprise on the part of journalists. Accepting such information on faith, however, poses problems, as will be revealed by a close look at some of the news stories and columns that followed President Reagan's March 31 declaration that the Soviets "have a definite margin of superiority."

On April 1, the day after the president's news conference, Jack Anderson's syndicated column contained an item that appeared to offer convincing evidence of the underhanded methods the Soviets were prepared to use to obtain such superiority. Quoting freely from a CIA document, Anderson reported that the Soviets were scheming to secretly turn some of their SS-20 medium-range missiles currently targeted on Europe into longer-range missiles that could threaten the U.S. The column quoted the leaked report as indicating that the SS-20 has "an accuracy of about .02 nautical miles," can be fired at rapid intervals from the back of the truck that carries it around, and can be surreptitiously converted into an SS-16 without anyone being the wiser. This last point was the crux, because the Soviets had undertaken in the unratified SALT II treaty not to produce, test, or deploy the SS-16.

On April 3, the *New York Post* was more forthright. Quoting "U.S. officials," correspondent Niles Lathem reported that "three Soviet mobile missile regiments, each

equipped with 12 nuclear-tipped SS-16 rockets, are poised in the frigid wastelands near Perm." Two days later syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak sprang into action with a report of a "still-secret consensus among U.S. intelligence agencies" that the Russians had deployed about 200 SS-16s at a place called Plesetsk in the northern Soviet Union. These "dread 6,000-nautical-mile missiles, housed in and fired from huge, wheeled vehicles capable of rapid movement," were, according to the columnists, "concealed under elaborate camouflage."

The following day Henry Trehwitt followed up at a more stately pace in the *Baltimore Sun*. Although State Department spokesman Dean Fischer had almost given the game away by stating that "our intelligence information does not support these statements," Trehwitt quoted unnamed officials as being "indignant at the denial" and reaffirming the basic truth of the Evans and Novak piece.

Michael Getler cast further doubt on these reports with a piece in the April 9 *Washington Post* in which he quoted "a top-ranking specialist" on these matters as describing the stories as "mostly garbage." But still the story did not go away. A month later, Daniel Southerland of *The Christian Science Monitor* quoted State Department officials on the subject of "'supersensitive' intelligence reports" relating to the ominous SS-16-related activities at Plesetsk, from which it appears that State had come into line after Fischer's denial. Clearly, someone was trying to tell us something.

A little history might have helped to throw some light on the matter. The SS-16 was yet another attempt by the Nadiradze Design Bureau to build a solid-fueled missile of the kind the U.S. has had since the Minuteman was introduced in the early 1960s. It was designed to have three stages and a single 500-kiloton warhead. The SS-20 is made up of two of those stages with a different guidance system and up to three warheads. As Strobe Talbott made clear in his book on the SALT II negotiations, *Endgame*, published in 1979, the Russians were only too happy to abandon the SS-16 at the SALT talks because it did not work very well. Talbott quotes a Pentagon expert as remarking derisively, "It was a dog of a missile — it was just no good, and it wasn't getting much better." But there was no hint of the missile's ill-starred past in the "supersensitive" handed down to journalists and passed on, unchallenged, to the public.

CONTINUED